DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 335 479 CE 058 598

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TITLE Workplace Literacy National Forum Sponsored by Frontier College Report (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, December 6-7, 1990).
INSTITUTION Frontier Coll., Toronto (Ontario).
PUB DATE Jan 91
NOTE 24p.
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Conference Proceedings (021)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Adult Literacy; Adults; Basic Skills; Economic Factors; English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; *Job Skills; Networks
IDENTIFIERS Canada; Frontier College (Canada); *Workplace Literacy

ABSTRACT

Frontier College hosted a 2-day national forum to discuss workplace literacy issues. The following issues were identified for inclusion: (1) delivery models for workplace literacy; (2) "show and tell" sessions; (3) networking opportunities; (4) discussion of literacy and English-as-a-Second-Language training; (5) services and supports to those in the workplace who are not literacy trainers; (6) success stories; (7) getting employers involved in addressing literacy; and (8) evaluation of programs. This report documents the forum proceedings and includes the following items: (1) a description of the forum process and objectives; (2) a summary of group discussions and individual presentations; (3) participants' recommendations for future forums; and (4) facilitator's recommendations, which included holding the forum once or twice per year and expanding it to other service providers, employers, and unions. (NLA)

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Report on the Workplace Literacy National Forum Sponsored by Frontier College

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January, 1991

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background Information

In June 1989, Learning in the Workplace delivered its first two-day train-the-trainer workshop entitled Workplace Literacy: the design and implementation of workplace learning programs. Fourteen participants attended from both Canada and the United States. Since then, Learning in the Workplace has delivered six workshops at Frontier College and two additional workshops in New Brunswick and British Columbia. A total of 121 business, education,governement and union representatives from across Canada have attended these workshops.

During the summer of 1990, Learning in the Workplace contacted 41 past participants. The purpose of the follow-up was:

- to find out in what ways participants had been able to apply the information gathered from the workshop
- to determine whether changes needed to be made in the workshop design and content
- to identify other participant needs that could be addressed by Frontier College

As a result of an expressed need, Frontier College hosted a two-day Workplace Literacy National Forum to discuss workplace literacy issues. Frontier College invited past participants to the Forum and solicited their input in follow-up telephone interviews as to what should be included for discussion at the forum. Past participants listed the following areas for inclusion:

- examples of different delivery models for workplace literacy; the advantages and disadvantages of each
- "show and tell" sessions with past participants talking about what has worked and what hasn't
- networking opportunities for those working in the area

- discussion on where literacy training begins and ESL/skill training begins
- services and supports to those in the workplace who are not literacy trainers
- success stories
- how to get employers and human resources people involved in addressing literacy
- more information on evaluation of programs

On December 6 and 7,1990, nineteen past participants from across Canada and Learning in the Workplace staff participated in the Forum.

B. Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is document the results of the proceedings of the forum "Learning in the Workplace: Network of Workplace Literacy Practitioners.". The report will include the following items:

- a description of the Forum process along with its objectives
- a summary of group discussions and individual presentations
- participants' recommendations for future forums
- facilitator's recommendations

II. DESCRIPTION OF THE FORUM PROCESS AND RESULTS

A. Design of the Forum Framework

The consultant designed the framework for the Forum in consultation with Learning in the Workplace staff. The expressed needs of past participants as indicated in follow-up phone calls were pivotal to the design.

The Forum was designed to provide an opportunity for the group to gel and become familiar with each other's contexts vis a vis workplace literacy.

As well, the framework of the Forum was constructed to create opportunities for maximum sharing of information and discussion of critical workplace issues identified by participants. Several past participants were asked to make presentations on workplace literacy initiatives.

The objectives of the Forum were as follows:

1. To share experiences related to the workplace literacy/basic skills initiatives;

2. To identify successful strategies in the implementation of workplace literacy/basic skills initiatives;

3. To pinpoint stumbling blocks in the process of implementing workplace literacy initiatives;

4. To generate possible strategies for addressing stumbling blocks;

5. To network with each other informally;

6. To exchange useful materials, articles and processes;

7. To decide how participants as a group want to network after the meeting ;

8. To identify professional development needs of the group;

B. Forum Process*

Day 1

i) Welcome and Introduction

The forum opened with welcoming remarks from the acting president of Frontier College, John Daniel O'Leary. Then each participant talked about the following:

- their role in workplace literacy
- involvement in activities around workplace literacy
- the meaning of workplace literacy
- objectives and expectations for the two-day forum

Participants contexts for workplace literacy included:

- focussing on awareness and promotion within the business community
- including literacy as part of other workplace courses
- establishing workplace learning programs in organizations
- stimulating training within the business community
- developing provincial policy around workplace literacy
- designing and evaluating literacy programs
- conducting research as to literacy needs with employers and deliverers
- training others to set up their own workplace literacy initiatives

* The agenda was adjusted to accomodate activities and discussions that went overtime.

Participants ascribed the following definitions to workplace literacy:

- empowerment in a workplace setting
- concern that the definition is getting too broad--all workplace programs are being called literacy
- learning process-- don't like empowerment;it is paternalistic
- helping organizations develop a learning culture
- meeting the needs of displaced workers and keeping up with new technology
- workplace literacy means training everyone

Participants volunteered the following further information as to their goals and expectations of the Forum:

- how to approach barriers to establishing workplace literacy initiatives
- discussion around language and definitions related to workplace literacy
- how to get employers and unions involved
- the time to find out what has worked for others
- opportunities to network with other participants
- sharing experiences as to how to approach employers in times of recession
- confirmation of the right approaches to take
- what's worked; what hasn't

ii) Marketing and Promotion: Getting the Support of Employers and Unions

Lori Baker, Manager, Employment Services, New Brunswick Department of Labour and Errol Williams, Co-ordinator, Workplace Literacy, New Brunswick Community College presented the group with a overview of why workplace literacy is important in New Brunswick. In addition, they discussed the current status of workplace literacy including success stories and barriers to getting things going. They also showed participants a marketing video they have produced to "sell" the idea of workplace literacy to employers.

The presentation gave an overview of the importance of workplace literacy in New Brunswick. Although the work force is adept at what it does, workers may lack the basic skills to keep up with changing technology in industries such as forestry, mining and agriculture. As a result of the different sectors and workplace cultures, approaches to workplace literacy have to be tailored to each workplace and its workers to be effective. Work force adjustment issues also contribute to an increasing need to address workplace literacy. Training money is available to address literacy upgrading through Technology and Commerce when it is hooked up with technical training.

Unions need to be approached differently than employers. For example, unions may prefer to a use a peer tutoring model rather than working with a community college.

Although the province is mainly at the awareness and promotion stage, there have been a few pilot workplace literacy projects implemented in New Brunswick. One example of a workplace initiative included an organization which implemented a new grade 12 requirement for all of its workers. As a result of this new requirement, 350 workers' jobs were effected. The workplace literacy project provided the opportunity for these workers to get their grade 12 equivalency through a partnership between the employer and the community college where the employer sponsored the program.

Lori and Errol cited many barriers to getting employers involved in workplace literacy initiatives as follows:

- competition-employers get many government salespersons knocking on their doors, selling different services; therefore the marketing for workplace literacy has to be "fun" and "different" to "wake people up"

- there is no training culture

- employers want quick solutions--there is no instant relief to the problem

The Departments of Labour and Advanced Education and Training have developed a promotional video and handbook for employers called "Investment in Skills." Errol and Lori presented the video to

the group. The video stresses the need for a commitment to life long learning and new ways of doing things to address new technology at the workplace. It also emphasizes co-operation and partnerships.

Four models of workplace literacy programming are outlined in the video:

1. In-House Model

Programs are offered at the workplace site during regular hours using peer tutoring. Therefore staff can participate either as a learner or a tutor.

2. On-Site Model

Programs are offered to small groups at the workplace site during regular hours with an instructor as facilitator.

3. Off Work Site

The program is facilitated by an instructor at a learning centre such as a community college or a union hall.

4. Cooperative Approach

Several small businesses can collectively hold a training session at one work site. A tutor or an instructor would facilitate training.

Errol and Lori listed some tips for marketing workplace literacy to employers:

1. Talk **$$$** if it's available. know your resources.(government, community and special initiatives)
2. Don't push "humanitarian" ethic.
3. Make it exciting!!!
4. Offer several options.
5. Identify "movers and shakers" in a company.
6. Know who to talk to.
7. Use federal government support through the Labour Force Development Strategy.

iii) Barriers to Getting Workplace Initiatives Going

The previous presentation lead naturally into a brainstorming session where participants listed barriers to getting workplace initiatives going. The list of barriers were used as a check throughout the forum for discussion of issues and possible strategies to address issues.

They were also used as a check by participants at the end of the session to see whether the Forum had accomplished its objective of providing opportunity to discuss means of overcoming barriers. Barriers listed by participants were as follows:

- lack of union commitment
- "living the Canadian lie"--we are not as good as we thought we were
- lack of a training culture in workplaces
- lack of dollars committed to workplace literacy
- a lack of understanding on the part of management of the labour market
- suspicion on the part of workers
- ignorance of economics
- perception of literacy issues as separate from other workplace issues
- employers not sure of the effectiveness of literacy programs
- there is no evaluation studies of past efforts
- there is the expectation that individuals must and will self-identify
- literacy, itself, holds stigma-- must be presented within the context of larger issues
- turf wars
- values of competition vs. co-operation among service providers
- not enough options
- no success models
- how to gage improvement
- fragmentation of what's going on in Canada
- companies may support literacy but not in their workplaces
- pejorative language
- whose responsibility is literacy--the individual's, government's`, the employer's?

- the recession
- literacy is not seen as a priority for government
- can't communicate the value of the services

iv) Small Group Discussion on Issues[1]

After lunch, participants broke into three small groups to talk about gaining the support of employers and unions. Following the small group discussion, a summary of each group's discussion was presented to the large group. Participants then made comments or asked questions about points made in the presentations.

All Groups-Gaining the Support of Employers and Unions

Discussion Questions:

Work in small groups to discuss the following questions. Elect a spokesperson to present a summary of your group's discussion to the large group.

Summary of Group Responses

1. **How can we raise awareness of the need to address workplace literacy issues among employers and unions? Who are the other players that need to be involved in raising awareness? What should their role be?**

All groups suggested that service providers working to raise awareness of employers and unions need to do their homework--find out as much as possible about the company and union before seeing them. They must also be sensitive to all the players and avoid making promises they can't keep. It may be easier to raise awareness an get things going with unions because they have the infrastructure in place to promote and establish programs. However, with unions there is the issue of turf wars--who can deliver in a unionized workplace and who can't.

1 Discussion questions for Forum were adapted from "Challenges and Solutions" Labour-Management Symposium, 1990. Lewe, G. and Waugh, S.

Other suggestions included using and knowing language specific to the industry of each client. Success stories from other projects would also help raise awareness. Employers may have a lot of awareness around literacy but the problem is getting them to actually do something about addressing issues. Other employers may say their employees don't have to read and write. In this case, it is important to make suggestion about looking at the issue in the long term. It's important to recognize that there are cases where it will be impossible to convince employers to examine the issue.

Another way to raise awareness is to hold forums where the different stakeholders can be involved in discussing the issue.

Other Players

supervisors
employees
media
churches
government
funders
families
schools
universities
senior management
politicians

Role

-catalyst
-managers
-advocates
-public spokesperson

2. **What are some of the barriers that you are aware of that stand in the way of employers and unions addressing workplace literacy issues? How can we address these barriers?**

Barriers

- pre-packaged programs
- lack of awareness
- cure-all attitude
- lack of process
- gaps in programs
- poor salespersonship

- no-cost programs are not seen as a priority or valuable
- the perception of deliverers that their role is mainly to set up and run programs
- at this point it's only possible to reach small number of workplaces

Addressing the Barriers

- customize and tailor services to the organization
- educate--be honest
- recognize barriers that can't be scaled
- allow time for, develop and use a process
- build a follow-up evaluation strategy for programs
- find successful models for selling
- act as a broker to other resources
- work with allies in the company through human resources; then they can convince the CEO
- be aware of funding sources and how to access these for companies
- convince government to take more of a promotional role with business

3. **What kind of case can we make to employers and unions that will convince them them that workplace literacy issues need to be addressed in difficult economic times?**

- find ways of assisting them to use internal resources
- retraining is a hot issue--use it
- use new models for literacy such as integration into regular training
- sell bonus aspects of the needs assessment
- run "out-of-work" programs

Day 2

i) Introduction

The day began by having participants talk about their success stories around workplace literacy initiatives. Participants involved in programs described situations where they had seen successful results from workplace literacy initiatives.

Examples given included the development of a workplace learning culture where previously there had been none. Other examples included workers keeping their jobs or receiving promotions as a result of building skills or learning new skills through workplace literacy initiatives. Other examples showed improvements at work.

ii) Models and Approaches to Workplace Literacy

Carolyn Dielman, Coordinator, Policy and Program Development, Career Development and Employment, Alberta government presented on the Alberta experience around workplace literacy. The Alberta government's role in workplace upgrading is to cultivate an environment where it can happen, share resources and build networks.

Strategies to address workplace literacy in Alberta have to be small-business oriented. Companies like Syncrude are few and far between. Oil, gas, forestry and service are the major industries. Two-thirds of the population lives in Calgary and Edmonton.

Four projects were outlined.

1. **Cambra** (refining and packaging plant of margarine and oil)

The company identified the need that they didn't have enough skills for the next five to ten years. 39 million dollars was spend modernizing the plant. A needs assessment was conducted with all 250 employees using the CAT test. A joint union/management advisory committee guided the project. The results of the tests were the property of the workers only. The teacher did a follow-up with each employee. Advanced computer training and high school equivalencies were offered. Classes were held three times a week. 200 people attended at a community college. The workers had a positive response to the college. They wanted it to be anonymous as. they felt it wasn't voluntary. The college also had an on-site tutor to provide individual support and assist learners with English upgrading, reading, writing and basic math.

2. Alberta Sugar

The company identified a need for chemistry upgrading for up to 125 regular and casual workers. Computer and chemistry upgrading was offered off-site. Math was offered first. Classes were offered all on company time. . There was no commitment to training and development. The programs were paid for by the government.

3. Stelco Steel, Edmonton Works

In 1989, the Alberta Vocational Centre ran a job effectiveness program of 100-300 hours including job-related English and math, computer skills and interpersonal skills. Programs were offered off site, once a week from 7- 12 for twenty weeks. Twelve volunteers registered for the project. Evaluations from tests, participants' and supervisors' feedback showed varying degrees of improvement.

4. Syncrude

Syncrude identified the need for supervisors to upgrade their reading and writing skills and for their workers to upgrade their skills to respond to technological skills. An Effective Reading in Context (ERIC) was offered.

Carolyn offered the following summary points about workplace literacy in Alberta:

- the reasons for workplace literacy courses include:

  -technological change
  -base for other training
  -a way to enhance other well-developed skills

- the classroom and hoslistic learning style works best

- a model off-site using community colleges also has been successful

- participants in programs have fallen mainly into Statistics Canada levels 2 and 3

The presentation was followed by a question and answer period. Participants exchanged workplace literacy resources before lunch.

iii) Small Group Discussion

After lunch. participants chose an issue they wanted to work on Participants worked in two groups and reported a summary of their discussion back to the whole group.

Group 1- Assessing the needs of an organization/workplace

Discussion Questions

Work in small groups to discuss the questions that follow. Elect a spokesperson to present a summary of your group's discussion to the large group.

Often management and union representatives within a company are aware that workers may have problems with basic skills. Often, though, they may not be aware of the extent of the problem and how it interrelates with other workplace issues.

1. **How can companies and the unions (with the assistance of a service provider) discover the scope of the problem without having a negative impact on workers?**

Group Response

- First, an overview of job requirements is needed.
- Then design your data collection instruments--questionnaires, interview questions.
- Talk to a representative sampling of all levels of the company (shop floor employees, supervisors and senior management) to find gaps in perceptions around basic skills.
- Look at existing training programs.
- Observe employees where they "hang out."--like in the company cafeteria.

- Needs assessment must be voluntary. Key players such as supervisors can help in determining people for the assessment.

The point was made in the large group that at the initial stage of assessment, one should examining literacy and learning issues within the context of the organization. Therefore, assessing an individual's learning needs has no place at this stage. This step would come much later.

2. What are some ways that these players can gain support throughout the workplace for identifying and addressing workplace literacy issues within the reality in which they occur?

Group Response

All stakeholders must buy in and take ownership to the process. In addition, there has to be a lot of discussion at all levels prior to a needs assessment. A formalized statement on literacy would strengthen support. For example, the creation of a company Learning Committee. A long term and on-going commitment to programs would foster a training culture. Literacy can become part of existing programs. (this can make people feel more comfortable--when they know a program). Confidentiality is a must--from company to company and from workers to company. Also, outside providers should review all information with the company before reporting it. Service providers should develop a clear language summary of the report for committee members.

Service providers and others often present stand-alone workplace literacy programs as the "magic cure" to improve productivity, safety and communications at the workplace. In addition they promise that employees will be more versatile and promotable.

3. What other aspects of an organization will have an impact on these "promised outcomes"?

Group Response

- existing training programs
- who the employees are (gender, ethnicity, race)
- wages/built-in incentives

- labour-management relations
- size of company
- location--urban vs. rural
- economy--down or upturn in the economy
- types of equipment and process used
- management styles
- community development--affluence in the community
- shift changes
- technology

4. **How can we avoid defining the problem and solutions in simplistic terms and promising unrealistic outcomes?**

Group Response

- it's a question of product vs. process
- define parameters--how far you can go with your resources
- don't make false promises
- give them tools only
- show the extent of self-directedness (increased participation in other areas)

Group 2- Building Partnerships

Discussion Questions

Work in small groups to discuss the questions that follow. Elect a spokesperson to present a summary of your group's discussion to the large group.

Building partnerships is important if workplace literacy issues are to be addressed.

1. **Who are all the potential partners?**

- government (EIC)
- educators
- community -based advocates
- social institutions and agencies
- consultants
- industrial training councils

- service providers
- labour
- professional associations

2. What expertise does each partner bring?

Company personnel and unions bring the subject matter expertise and knowledge of the workplace and workers which is crucial in developing the curriculum. Service providers bring expertise around how to approach literacy and learning at the workplace.

3. How can a smooth partnership be established without running into a sticky battle over control?

Issues need to be discussed upfront such as:

- the organizational needs assessment; how it will be conducted
- testing and who gets the results; the role of management and unions vis a vis the instructor
- logistics, scheduling, access to work site for instructor
- who pays for what
- stated expectations
- organizational insights: what's worked and what hasn't
- previous training history
- hidden partners from other ares of the company that might support the project

In addition, consultation needs to be ongoing with all partners.

iv) Guiding Principles--Preliminary Ideas

The group then came up with some preliminary ideas for principles or a "code of ethics" that service providers need to follow.

1. Listen first and ask questions later.

2. Don't make promises you can't keep.

3. There should be a consistency of message to everyone in the workplace.

4. Make sure learners don't get lost in the process.

5. Respect is of utmost importance:
   - -clients
   - -workers
   - -cultures
   - -language and communication

6. Do your homework and know your audience.

7. Build partnerships wherever you see the opportunity.

8. Remember literacy is at the core even if you don't call it that.

9. Don't call things that are not literacy "literacy."

10. Know your clients. Workers are clients.

III. Participants' Reflections and Recommendations

The two-day forum ended with a closure where participants were asked to respond to two questions:

1. "What have we gained over the last two days?"

2. "Where do we go from here as a group?"

Question 1- Group Response

Participants felt that they had gained the following through the Forum:

- a new lease on literacy
- new concepts of partnerships
- information on what everyone is doing--success stories
- opportunity to network with others across Canada--do not feel alone
- understanding of partnerships between government and service providers
- opportunity to share experiences and materials
- new sense of power in not being "sole experts"
- building bridges with other service providers--colleagues not competition
- level of sophistication in talking about literacy
- others out there thinking about literacy the same way I am

Question 2- Group Response

- There was concensus on the part of the group that this type of forum should take place once or twice a year. Their importance was stressed as was the fact that this momentum must not be lost. The idea should be expanded and the group could serve as a resource. The participants suggested that Frontier College try to access money from the Secretary of State to have another Forum in 6 months--May, 1991. The Forum needs to be open and inclusive to break down turf wars. Errol Williams and Lori Baker offered to host the next Forum in New Brunswick.

- The Learning in the Workplace newsletter can also be used as a forum. We can keep other up-to-date by sending in progress reports and success stories.

IV. Facilitators' Recommendations

The facilitator concurs with the recommendations of the participants. Forums should be held every six months and expanded to include other service providers, employers and unions. In addition, she recommends that the next Forum be held in New Brunswick in May, 1991. She also suggests that those involved in workplace

literacy set up regional networks to discuss issues of importance around workplace literacy.